

## The emissions reduction commitments set out by the U.S. and China are welcome steps towards avoiding dangerous climate change.

*On 12 November President Obama and China's President Xi Jinping announced a commitment that the two countries would reduce their greenhouse gas emissions beyond what had been previously promised. **Bob Ward** looks at the agreement, writing that while it bodes well for next year's Paris climate change summit, stronger commitments will be needed for emissions to stay below the warming limit.*



Added momentum has been given to efforts to construct a new international agreement on climate change following [a joint announcement](#) earlier this month by the United States and China.

President Xi Jinping and President Barack Obama set out new commitments for their countries during a press conference in Beijing on 12 November. President Obama pledged that the United States would reduce its annual emissions of greenhouse gases “by 26-28 percent below its 2005 level in 2025 and to make best efforts to reduce its emissions by 28 percent”. The joint announcement also committed China to “achieve the peaking of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions around 2030 and to make best efforts to peak early and intends to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20 percent by 2030”. The initiative by the world's two biggest emitters of greenhouse gases is expected to increase the chances of reaching a global agreement on climate change at a United Nations summit in Paris in December 2015.

President Obama's commitment goes beyond the target of cutting annual emissions by 17 percent compared with 2005 by 2020, which was included in the ‘[The President's Climate Action Plan](#)’ in June 2013. It is also designed to be consistent with the pledge made by the United States Government in 2010 to reduce annual emissions by 83 percent by 2050 compared with 2005.

By comparison, the UK's Climate Change Act commits the UK to a reduction in annual emissions of at least 80 percent by 2050 compared with 1990. Analysis by the LSE's Grantham Research Institute [shows](#) that the Act's goal is equivalent to a cut of 76 per cent compared with 2005, and is less ambitious than the target set by the United States.



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However, the shorter term targets set by President Obama are weaker than those of the UK. The UK's 3rd carbon budget means the UK will reduce its annual emissions by 34 per cent by 2020 compared with 1990, equivalent to a cut of 24 per cent compared with 2005. The UK's 4th carbon budget commits the UK to bring down its annual emissions by 50 per cent by 2025 compared with 1990, equivalent to a reduction of 42 per cent compared with 2005.

President Xi's pledge came after his Vice-Premier, Zhang Gaoli, [told](#) a United Nations summit in New York in September 2014 that China's total emissions of carbon dioxide would reach a peak "as early as possible". China is already planning to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP by 40 to 45 percent by 2020 compared with 2005. This is stronger than the UK's 3rd carbon budget which means a cut in the emissions intensity of its GDP by 39 per cent by 2020 compared with 2005.

The joint announcement by President Xi and President Obama followed extensive discussions between the governments of China and the United States. In April 2013, the two governments [set up](#) a 'Climate Change Working Group' to elevate the importance of the issue internationally. At their first meeting in California in June 2013, [the two leaders said](#) that their countries will phase out of hydrofluorocarbons, a category of powerful greenhouse gases.

The joint announcement explicitly acknowledged the international goal, agreed in Cancún in 2010, to limit emissions to avoid dangerous global warming of more than 2°C.

However, the targets for the cuts by China and the United States are not consistent with a global annual emissions pathway that would keep warming beneath the 2°C limit. President Xi and President Obama implicitly acknowledged that stronger cuts will be needed, stating: "Both sides intend to continue to work to increase ambition over time".

New figures show the scale of the challenge for the United States. Its annual emissions of greenhouse gases in 2012 were 10.0 percent lower than in 2005, [according to](#) the Environmental Protection Agency. However, the Energy Information Administration [recorded](#) a 2.5 percent rise in carbon dioxide emissions from the burning of fossil fuels in 2013 compared with the previous year, and forecast a further increase of 1.0 percent in 2014.

The rise in emissions is due to an increase in the amount of coal used for electricity generation, partly driven by an upping of the price of natural gas. But President Obama expects the 2025 target to be achieved by the United States even if no new federal legislation is passed to tackle climate change. Leading Congressional members,

such as Senator James Inhofe of the Republican Party, have [reiterated](#) their opposition to action against climate change despite the joint announcement by the two Presidents.

China's new commitment to peak its emissions is likely to be reflected in the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, for the period from 2016 to 2020, which is also likely to include a target of reducing coal consumption after 2020.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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